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Interview: Kris P. Taylor

Emily Caston



Figure 1: Kris P. Taylor. Photo: Mike Taylor.

Kris P. (formerly Puskiewicz) Taylor moved to New York from London in 1980. She was working at Island Records in the Publicity and Artist Development department when MTV was launched in 1981. The department quickly expanded to include music videos and she was soon promoted to Director of Music Video Promotion and Production. She left in 1985 to work as Executive Producer at Zbig Vision in New York after commissioning Zbigniew Rybczyński's first music video, the MTV-award-winning Close to the Edit (1985) by Art of Noise. After successfully working together on fourteen videos over two years Kris moved briefly to work at MCA Records in Los Angeles and then in 1988 became Director of Music Video Production at Columbia Records (West Coast), working with artists such as Bob Dylan, The Rolling Stones, Michael Bolton, The Bangles, Alice In Chains, Billy Joel, Carlos Santana and Mariah Carey. In all she commissioned or was involved in the production of over three hundred music videos.

This interview was held in London on 2 December 2016.

I visited New York in 1979 and then moved there in about 1980. All the English bands were playing there: Adam and the Ants, Human League, OMD, Depeche Mode, The Police, Boy George and Culture Club, Eurythmics. It was just an unbelievable time. It was the second British invasion, The Beatles in the 1960s being the first. *Newsweek* featured a portrait of Annie Lennox and Boy George on its cover. Freddie Laker started flying very inexpensive flights to New York in the late 70s and for the first time people could fly to the US cheaply. New Yorkers embraced the Brits. I eventually got a job at Island Records in 1980 working in the publicity department and then the newly created video department. The roster included mainly British artists: Marianne Faithfull, Steve Winwood, Robert Palmer and of course Bob Marley and other reggae artists like Toots and the Maytals and Aswad as well as U2 and Grace Jones.

Before that, I was working in a photo lab in London called Presentation Colour working with a lot of photographers including album sleeve designers such as Hipgnosis (All Pink Floyd covers, Peter Gabriel, 10cc) and the art departments of some record labels like CBS. They used our photographs to do layouts for album sleeves.

A lot of my friends were going to New York and coming back with wonderful stories. I had ambitions to become a photographer's agent and it was time to move on from Presentation Colour so I decided to take a few months off and travel to the US. I sublet my flat in West Hampstead and went to stay with a friend of a friend in New York who lived in the very cool East Village on 2nd Avenue and had a spare room. I was essentially a tourist but also had several contacts to meet up with in the music and photography world.

I was offered a temporary job as a receptionist at a booking agency called FBI (Frontier Booking International) which was owned and run by Ian Copeland, brother of Stuart Copeland, drummer in The Police, and Miles Copeland, who ran the very cool IRS Records. The agency booked mainly British bands to tour (and therefore break) in America. I very quickly learnt a lot about the US and the music business and made a lot of friends. Bands used to come to New York then usually in a transit van or two to play gigs in clubs all around the country from Philadelphia to Nashville, Cleveland, Minneapolis, Austin, Denver. I remember, The Police came to New York in 1980 and played in a small club, I think it might have been The Ritz. Within three or four months they were playing arenas.

The opportunity to grow and get exposed was amazing. College radio was very important then. College radio would play British bands and the college press would review gigs, records and interview bands when they passed through their town or do telephone interviews. I went to a lot of gigs at clubs like The Ritz and Irving Plaza. Through networking

I met Ellen Smith who was the head of publicity at Island Records. She offered me a job as her assistant. I put the photography thing to the side, although it remained a hobby and interest and started doing the college and local press. My job was to keep an updated mailing list, mail out albums and press releases and set up interviews for bands who were on the road, mainly bands like U2, Grace Jones, Robert Palmer and Marianne Faithful.

Island was based at Madison Avenue and 49th Street in New York, in a beautiful art deco building. We were on the 32nd floor with spectacular views. I lived in the East Village on the Hells Angels block, East Third Street. I was paying very little rent; it was very funky but in a terrific location, walking distance to clubs and cafes on St Mark's Place, the subway, buses and not far from Greenwich Village and Soho. I often used to see Quentin Crisp in the neighbourhood as he also lived on 3rd Street and we used to be able to get the Sunday *New York Times* on a Saturday night at midnight at the famous newsagent Gem Spa, on the corner of St Mark's Place and 2nd Avenue, where I used to see celebrities such as Allen Ginsberg.

The difference between New York and London was that it was such a twenty-four-hour city. The clubs were great. I sort of missed the boat on Studio 54, but there was The Peppermint Lounge, Danceteria, Irving Plaza and The Ritz, where loads of English bands played. Bands like Siouxsie and the Banshees, Adam Ant, Madness, Echo and the Bunnymen. I remember making friends with Nicky Tompkins who worked for Pink Floyd (she later moved on to work at MTV). Stiff Records had offices on 57th Street. Island distributed Ze Records which was owned/run by Michael Zilkha, who came from the UK. Around 1983 Malcom McLaren came to the US to promote the "Buffalo Gals" album and his art director Nick Egan settled in New York for a while. Nick later became a very successful music video director doing album artwork and videos for INXS and Duran Duran in the 90s. He moved to Los Angeles in the late 80s and still lives there.

In the first few months, I was working for Ellen Smith in Publicity and Artist Development learning how to do publicity on the job, setting up interviews with journalists as well as radio, attending gigs and making sure journalists were on the guest list or had tickets and were able to meet artists if possible. Then videos started coming to us from the Head Office in London. I already enjoyed going to video clubs especially the Ritz which was just on 11th Street and Third Avenue, a few blocks from where I lived in the East Village. They were always cutting edge. And really interesting. I was usually the first person to look at the video, and as there was no TV outlet yet, I would take them to the VJ at the Ritz on my way home and they would immediately play them on their huge screen. They were three-quarter inch, great big clunky things!

It was during that period I realised that being involved in music video was where I wanted to be. Two significant videos that blew me away and confirmed my passion were Michael Jackson's *Billie Jean* [1982], directed by British director Steve Barron and produced by Simon Fields of Limelight and David Bowie's *Ashes to Ashes* [1980], directed by David Mallet for MGMM.

RockAmerica, Ed Steinberg's video distribution company, was the pioneering company that made compilations of videos; they were given by record labels and distributed to clubs around the country. Ed was a director who had worked with Blondie and then directed Madonna's first video *Everybody* [1983] but my main contact there was Lyn Healy; she loved British bands so was always very keen to receive the Island videos—U2, Grace Jones,

Blancmange—and we became very good friends. She later went on to work at N. Lee Lacey video production company and then ran Vivid Productions in Los Angeles (Luc Roeg's company). RockAmerica also published a weekly magazine with a video chart and stories about what was in production and recent releases.

Sound and Vision was owned and run by Tima Surmelioglu who was the VJ at the Peppermint Lounge and then at the phenomenal Palladium, which had two huge matrix screens hanging from the ceiling (twenty-five screens on each), and Liz Silver, who now owns and runs Believe Media with Luke Thornton. They formed a video production company called The End in the late 80s in New York then moved to Los Angeles and now produce mainly commercials. Sound and Vision also distributed compilations of mainly dance videos that they distributed to clubs and both Tima and Liz became very good friends. Tima also moved to Los Angeles in the early 90s and became a producer working at Propaganda Films and then on long-form concerts.

MTV was launched in August 1981. The first video they played was Island's *Video Killed the Radio Star* [1979] by The Buggles (Trevor Horn); it was so exciting. We just couldn't wait for this when it was announced we were going to have a cable channel that would play music videos all day long. Ellen Smith and I were responsible for delivering the videos to MTV and our contact there was Gail Sparrow who had worked at CBS records in the Press Department. Most commissioners in the US were women as the department usually followed on from publicity which was traditionally a female domain.

Before long, our responsibilities in the press department included taking artists to be interviewed on MTV and I became the head of the Island Music Video Distribution Department as Ellen had less time. We had cable TV in the US so we could literally watch music videos twenty-four hours a day—I have to admit that I became a bit of an addict and would just turn on MTV at every opportunity. There were four entertaining VJs and a few artist interviews but it was mainly back-to-back videos. Later on they introduced comedy like *Beavis and Butt-Head* [MTV 1993–1997]. Sadly, these days there are far fewer videos.

I oversaw production of videos for Motorhead, who were on another subsidiary label called Bronze Records, and Joe Cocker. I was still distributing videos to clubs and small TV channels around the US. Although I was not yet commissioning, I was asked to cover video shoots, for instance the Frankie Goes to Hollywood concert version for "Relax" [1984] in London which was directed by David Mallet. Then in 1984 I met Zbigniew Rybczyński through Gale Sparrow at MTV. He was a Polish director who had just won the Oscar for Best Animated Short Film with *Tango* [1981]—it was a brilliant piece of work and his potential as a music video director was obvious. So I commissioned my first video hiring Zbig to direct *Close to the Edit* [1985] by The Art of Noise on ZTT Records (Zang Tumb Tuum), Trevor Horn's label which Island also distributed. The video was nominated for five MTV Awards and won two for Best Editing and Most Innovative Video.

Chris Blackwell was keen to have in-house production and he hired Andrea Ambandos who was a TV producer, so I worked with her on a couple of projects for Malcolm McLaren and a band called Redds and The Boys from Washington DC. I didn't really know what I was doing but shooting on location in DC was a real eye-opener and I was learning a lot very fast! Meanwhile, I was meeting a lot of directors and producers who were coming to NY and meeting with record labels looking for work. RockAmerica held a video seminar, then

Billboard Magazine also decided to have annual Music Video Conventions (I think the first one was in Los Angeles). British artists and videos were I believe a major part of the MTV programming. Bands who would have had to tour North America and play in small clubs, do endless radio and press interviews would now get massive exposure through a video on MTV—bands such as Duran Duran, Human League, The Eurythmics, Depeche Mode, Spandau Ballet.

Then Zbig set up a production company called Zbig Vision and asked me to represent him and be the executive producer. Although I did not have much experience, I spoke Polish as both my parents were Polish and it was my first language. Zbigniew and his wife spoke very little English so it was important for me to translate his treatments and also at meetings. They had a beautiful loft down in Tribeca where he lived with his Polish wife and their 11-year-old son and where he had his editing suite. We also shot the odd video there as it was very spacious. I had moved to Soho and lived on the corner of 6th Avenue and Prince Street so it was very convenient. We produced two Simple Minds videos commissioned out of Virgin Records UK (*Alive and Kicking* [1985] and *All the Things She Said* [1985]), The Pet Shop Boys' second version of their hit, *Opportunities: Let's Make Lots of Money* [1986]; Yoko Ono's *Hell in Paradise* [1985], which also won the MTV award for Most Innovative Video in 1986. I was with him for about two years and then we parted company and I did some freelance work in New York working on two Matt Johnson videos with Tim Pope who I had become friends with when he first came to NY in the early 80s.

I moved to Los Angeles to work at MCA Records as the video commissioner in 1986. In those days, video commissioners were working seven days a week. Because in America we were always shooting on weekends. It was gruelling. And I remember that summer I worked six weekends on the trot. That's five days a week plus weekends. Maybe we were all doing it. I don't know. Maybe I didn't know how to say no. I worked with some great artists like Jody Watley, Gladys Knight and the Pips, Belinda Carlisle and Glen Fry, but I was very happy when I was offered a job at Columbia Records. We had a brilliant artist roster: Bob Dylan, Barbra Streisand, The Bangles, Alice in Chains, Harry Connick Jr, Fishbone, The Rolling Stones, George Michael, Pink Floyd and Kate Bush. I was commissioning for Columbia on the West Coast. Their head office was in the Black Rock building in New York on 6th Avenue.

The music industry was changing very fast and CDs were about to replace albums and cassettes. People started to move to LA because a lot of video shoots were happening there. Because it was easier to shoot, to find a studio or a location, because it was Hollywood. The film crews are there, the sets are there. The weather is there. The desert is there. So locations are very easy to find. Shooting in New York is much harder. Physically gruelling. There were companies like Propaganda, they set up offices in 1986–87. And then Luc Rogue set up Vivid Productions (Tony Van den Ende, Andy Morahan), with Lyn Healy (from RockAmerica in New York) as executive producer. Liz Silver and Luc Thornton moved The End (later to become Believe Media) from New York to Los Angeles. Limelight already had their office in LA and Caroline True from the UK came over to be executive producer. Most labels had offices in both New York and Los Angeles so commissioners like Doug Kluthe from EMI and Robin Sloane from Elektra transferred to LA. Nick Egan moved to Los Angeles to work with Lyn at Vivid Productions.

At Columbia we would commission one video at a time. We had marketing meetings every week when we would discuss the (huge) release schedules and marketing strategy for each artist. Columbia was a very well run, organised label. I worked very closely with the

marketing directors, the publicity department and the art department. We also worked closely with managers. It was intense. And the artists were constantly touring. So you would have to schedule video shoots around their itinerary and often include some live footage in the video. The logistics were often a challenge.

Step one of the process would be to meet with the manager and artist if possible or have a telephone conversation (no emails yet!) and discuss the style and image we were going for—a conceptual video or performance, include some live footage or archive footage, studio or location, one or two day shoot. A lot of factors were determined by budget. The average budget in late 1980s/early 90s was \$60–\$80,000 (\$25–\$40,000 for a new artist), and obviously more for established artists such as George Michael, Michael Bolton, Barbara Streisand, The Rolling Stones, Billy Joel, etc. And I would usually know the availability of most directors. We would look at showreels together or the artist/manager may make reference to a video they had seen. We'd like it to look like Gerard de Thame's *Wonderful Life* video for Black [1988] or a concert video directed by Wayne Isham. Then we would make a short list of directors, check interest and availability and send out the music.

Unless the artist already had a relationship with a particular director, I would usually ask two or three directors for a treatment. I would then speak to the relevant producers or directors to discuss and develop the ideas and then run them by the artist's marketing director before presenting to the manager and artist, by which time I would probably be trying to sway them to the one that I thought was the best or most appropriate.

Certain established artists like Michael Bolton may just want to work with the same director, in his case Dominic Sena on two or three videos. Warrant was a hard rock band that I worked with on several videos and they enjoyed working with Nick Morris a lot. We shot with Nick in New York and in Florida and he also did a long-form concert with them. They also chose to work with Jeff Stein on one video and Meiert Avis on another. Eddie Money had worked with Nick Morris before I came to Columbia so we went directly to Nick for videos that I commissioned for him. The Bangles decided themselves that they wanted Tim Pope to direct *Eternal Flame* [1989], which was fine by me as I knew him and his producer Lisa Bryer and he would have been one of my first choices anyway. The first video I commissioned for Martika was with Jim Shea directing [*Toy Soldiers*, 1989] and I was very happy when she chose to do the next one with him also as they already had a relationship and he knew how to shoot her/light her. But then later on she wanted a change and we made a very successful video with Michael Haussman [*Love ... Thy Will be Done*, 1991].

Funnily enough, The Rolling Stones were one of the easiest bands to work with. I commissioned a couple of videos from the *Steel Wheels* album. They were very professional and polite. Mick Jagger made most of the decisions. Peter Mensch, their manager at the time, set up a meeting for us to discuss the best concert directors. Peter and I agreed that Wayne Isham and Curt Marvis would be the best choice and after a short conversation about what they had done that decision was made very quickly and easily. We shot them in Boston four nights running and I would say that is one of the highlights of my career. That, the Billy Joel video *We Didn't Start the Fire* [1989], directed by Chris Blum, and working with Yoko Ono who was also a professional beginning to end.

Managers would at times feel that they weren't doing their job properly unless they got three or four treatments. I suppose also having been a producer I knew how much work goes

into putting a treatment together. The director listens to the song twenty times, listens to the back catalogue. Looks at previous videos. A huge amount of work goes into it from the production company and I hated telling a producer that they had not got the job! It's a lot of work for me too to send out the music and previous videos, have meetings or phone conversations with the directors and producers. I was probably involved in about forty videos a year and must have made between 200 and 250 in my five years at Columbia. There were about six in various stages of production at any one time.

Sometimes the artists did favour British directors, especially if they'd seen a hit on MTV shot by a British director. A high percentage of videos on MTV were directed by British directors: Brian Grant, Russell Mulcahy, Julien Temple, Danny Kleinman, Godley and Crème, Jim Yukich. Tommy Mottola the head of (by now) Sony Music chose Andy Morahan to direct Mariah Carey's first video because of his success with George Michael. You'd get a label executive saying we want so and so from London. But you'd have to try and explain to them, it's a hit because the record is a hit. That director isn't going to make A B or C artist great. It was another battle that we had to go through. You need a great song!

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